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ABSTRACT

This paper addresses helping children in Reading Recovery who are not responding to instruction: it focuses on conditions that are under the control and influence of teachers and teacher leaders, leaving aside questions of whether the school program or district implementation may be flawed. Sections of the paper address: (1) lack of acceleration as an implementation issue; (2) lack of acceleration as a teaching issue; and (3) beginning the analysis: checking on yourself. It then presents four scenarios that discuss problems that often arise in teaching Reading Recovery children: the child does not take on the task of learning; processing problems with text reading; the child has difficulty remembering; and processing problems in hearing sounds in words. It concludes that teachers must consider each child individually. Contains 12 references. (EF)

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Helping the Hard-to-Accelerate Child: Problem-Solving the More Difficult Cases.

by Noel Jones

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Helping the Hard-to-accelerate Child: Problem-solving the More Difficult Cases

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Anyone who works with literacy education is aware of children who have difficulty learning to read and write. Reading Recovery, of course, is designed for children who have the least early learning success and who are hard-to-teach. However, even from Reading Recovery teachers, we hear comments and appeals for help about a few children who do not respond easily even to skilled one-to-one instruction.

Clay includes a special section in her text for Reading Recovery practitioners (Clay, 1993, p. 56-57) entitled, "Children who are hard to accelerate." Her position is clear: "There is only one position to take in this case. The programme is not, or has not been, appropriately adapted to the child's needs" (p. 56).

> **... when the child is hard to accelerate he is finding some part or parts of the reading process difficult.**
>
> ***M. Clay***

Lack of Acceleration as an Implementation Issue

One of the first questions Clay asks the reader is, "Are you operating the programme as required?" (p. 56). This question is addressed as much to administrators as to Reading Recovery teachers. Many factors are associated with the establishment of the program at the school that can keep it from operating as intended. The expectation for consistent, daily delivery of lessons is a particularly important factor.

In this paper, however, I shall focus on conditions that are under the control or influence of teachers and teacher leaders, and I shall leave aside the possibility that the school program or district implementation may be flawed in ways that may hinder children's learning. An assumption here, then, is that children are receiving consistent daily lessons and that other quality implementation conditions are in effect.

Lack of Acceleration as a Teaching Issue

No simple answer can be given to the question of how to get a "hard-to-accelerate" child started on successful learning. Clay makes it clear that the individual teacher must assume responsibility to puzzle out what might be holding the child back. She advises, "First, check up on yourself as a teacher" (Clay, 1993, p. 56). Whether the school is, ". . . operating the programme as required," or not, this question is still highly relevant to the teaching of each individual child and should be the starting point for the teacher's analysis. The teacher needs to ask herself, for example, whether she is teaching daily 30-minute lessons containing all the lesson components—or whether she is perhaps changing the program in some way.

Clay goes on to advise: "In general, when the child is hard to accelerate he is finding some part or parts of the reading process difficult. Often he has learned to do something which is interfering with his progress, and he may have learned it from the way you have been teaching" (Clay, 1993, p. 56-57). In checking on themselves, teachers are advised to check their records carefully and observe the child's literacy behavior very closely to try to figure out what has been happening and what might need to change. However, she also advises the teacher, after a careful analysis on her own, to seek assistance from a col-

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league. "You are likely to have some blind spots. . . and the opinions of colleagues could be most useful for the readjustment of your programme. It has been one of the values of the Inservice Training sessions that teachers have been able to pool their collective wisdom on their most puzzling pupils" (Clay, 1993, p. 57).

Hard-to-accelerate children are challenging but also interesting. A teacher can learn a great deal through in-depth analysis of a child's processing and of her interactions with the child. Working with colleagues is also interesting and instructive and many times productive for teachers' learning as well as children's. In the following paragraphs, I will share some perceptions of working with hard-to-accelerate children based upon my own teaching and consulting experiences. I do not presume to cover this topic, as Clay's entire text, *Reading Recovery: A Guidebook for Teachers in Training* (1993), is devoted to the topic of working with children who have difficulty acquiring literacy. Nor do I presume to offer solutions for children whom others are teaching. The discussion below is offered in the hope that it may be of some use to others in posing questions about the children they teach and in thinking about potential areas of difficulty and different types of learning problems.

A teacher can learn a great deal through in-depth analysis of a child's processing and of her interactions with the child.

Beginning the analysis: Checking on yourself

Although difficult for many teachers to accept, the possibility exists that the fault may lie in the teaching rather than in the child. At first, as they see children respond to the lesson framework and activities and to the individual attention they receive, teachers may focus on the *procedures* offered in Clay's text (1993) as the answer to learning problems. When one or more children do not respond satisfactorily to their use of procedures, teachers find a comforting explanation in the fact that all Reading Recovery children do not succeed in catching up with their peers. The realization may develop slowly that, for some children, intense analysis and problem-solving are necessary and that through these efforts some children making slow progress may begin to accelerate their learning.

Sometimes teachers hold, "...assumptions about the child that could be wrong" (Clay, 1993, p. 56). Teachers may assume, for example, that a particular child is not capable of learning. The culture of American schools has tended to foster low expectations for children who have great difficulty beginning the process of becoming literate (Allington & Walmsley, 1995). Teachers may easily develop misconceptions concerning the children they teach. According to Clay, "... children's responding can be very controlling of the way teachers respond, and teacher demands can be very controlling of how children will be allowed to respond" (Clay, 1991, p. 302). That is, a child's behavior may be leading the teacher to respond to the child in non-productive ways. On the other hand, the teacher's behavior may be leading the child to respond to learning tasks in ways that do not develop strategic problem-solving. For example, a child's learned helplessness or a teacher's tendency to offer support may lead to a dependence that hinders learning. Because it is so difficult to observe ourselves objectively, Clay urges teachers to problem-solve with a peer after beginning an analysis on one's own.

Another way that teaching can be responsible for a child's learning limitations has to do with level of difficulty. "Instruction can manipulate the balance of challenge and familiarity to make the child's task easy or hard" (Clay, 1991, p. 288). Instruction that is too easy or too hard can lead to inappropriate learning responses, ineffective strategies, and poor motivation. If teachers err, probably they should err on the side of too easy. However, given the pressures on teachers to produce learning gains, teachers find it easy to push too hard for new learning before a child has sorted out confusions or become fluent and flexible with current knowledge.

Even though great variability exists, all children—before they enter school—learn a great deal about the world and about language and how it is used. This ability and propensity to learn may be sti-

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fled, encouraged or rekindled by the ways we respond to students in the individual tutoring sessions of Reading Recovery. Finding the key that will renew a child's enthusiasm and initiative for learning is one of the challenges the teacher must meet for each child. The earlier a solution is found, the greater the chance for accelerated learning. Thus, Roaming Around the Known is a critical time. We must not wait long before we analyze ourselves and seek to make changes in our interactions if we sense that a child is not showing signs of initiative and independence in learning.

In the next sections, particular areas of learning will be discussed in which problems often arise in teaching Reading Recovery children. These discussions will not provide the answers for particular learning needs. The only sufficient buttress against learning failure will be a corps of Reading Recovery teachers who take Clay's advice seriously and who become skilled analyzers of children's learning and of their own teaching decisions. Reading Recovery is difficult because it raises the level of expectation for teachers. They must become observers, learners, researchers, experimenters, and problem-solvers in the truest sense, in addition to becoming experts in communicating and interacting with children. But the result is highly rewarding, not only in terms of children's progress but in terms of teacher learning and empowerment as well.

Scenario: The child does not take on the task of learning

Some children do not easily develop an interest in reading and learning to read. A prime reason for that has been mentioned above—task difficulty. However, interest and motivation can be influenced by other factors. Vygotsky and others (Vygotsky, 1978; Rogoff, 1990; Tharp & Gallimore, 1988; Wertsch, 1991; Wells, 1985) have pointed out the social nature of learning. Literacy is a learning goal in our modern culture; however, a particular 6-year-old child who lacks adult and peer models may see no reason to enjoy books or learn to read. In addition, other inhibiting factors, such as abuse of many kinds, may have taught the child that learning or trying something new is far too risky.

Also, a child may be playing a game of control. Active or passive resistance may be the only weapon against pressures at home or school that threaten to overwhelm. Reading Recovery teachers can work against these tendencies by trying to influence the child's environment in positive directions. If possible, elicit positive support from parents and teachers. If their support may result in pressure and/or reprimand, seek to develop relationships for the child with other positive models. Become a stronger, more positive personal force in the child's life yourself. Increase your praise, give clearer models, check your expectations for this child, and continue to invite participation and response. Overcoming resistance to learning is one of the most difficult things teachers do. The longer a child remains in home or school conditions that reinforce fear and/or apathy, the more difficult it becomes to turn this around. This is one of the arguments for selecting the lowest

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children first—so that negative attitudes and patterns of responding can be broken before they become habituated and resistant to change.

Scenario: Processing problems with text reading

The most significant processing problem that might arise is the inability to produce coherent, fairly fluent, meaningful responses in text reading. Some would say that the task for the beginning reader is to read for the author's precise message, but that is an endpoint of learning to read. If we let this be the beginning point, many children will find the journey so difficult that they may develop all of the symptoms of reading "disability," including a lack of healthy confidence and a dislike of books and stories.

Children can begin to read for fluency and meaning even when their knowledge of print is still extremely limited. Through careful scaffolding, teachers can help the child generate the meaning and language structures that allow reading processing to begin. (By "reading processing," I mean keeping one's mind upon the meaning and language of a story while paying some attention to what is on the page. What is attended to on the page grows increasingly more sophisticated as reading ability grows, but so does the child's ability to utilize more complex meaning and language structures, a point too frequently under-emphasized.)

A teacher can help a child establish the meaning of a story by creating a readable text based upon the child's experiences or by engaging the child in conversation about the pictures of a book. Through the same means, the child can be helped to anticipate the flow of language that tells the story. Then, as the child "reads" this text independently, mis-matches which the child begins to notice become opportunities for learning. A sensitive, observant teacher selectively uses these mis-matches as teaching examples to help children discover more about how print represents language.

Finding the key that will renew a child's enthusiasm and initiative for learning is one of the challenges the teacher must meet for each child.

Teachers tend to undervalue children's early reading attempts that approximate text. Total invention with no reference to print guideposts is, of course, nonproductive for the school-age child (although this is a positive step for the pre-school child). Many children enter Reading Recovery without the concept or the ability to match oral language to print on a one-to-one basis and will need to learn how to attend to print. Yet, I suggest that holding the child accountable for perfect one-to-one matching from the beginning may be premature. Not only do beginners lack understanding of print concepts, but they may not understand how oral language can be separated into words and smaller elements. Experiences in reading and writing are educative not only in teaching children how print works, but also in causing them to reflect on oral language and think about its units (Olson, 1995).

As Reading Recovery teachers, we need to divest ourselves of the notion that all of the learning about print-language correspondence needs to occur, or will occur, by text level three. Of course, we must be sure that children continue to sort out their understandings both of print and of language elements, and that they continue to grow towards accuracy in reading. And it is appropriate to expect precise pointing as the child works at matching speech to print. But pushing too hard can make the task difficult and laborious, thereby defeating the acceleration we seek to foster. On the other hand, for some children, inventing text may become a strong skill that blocks learning. The task of the Reading Recovery teacher is to decide when the child has sufficient knowledge of both print and oral language units to insist on a precise reading of text, when the standards of accountability for self monitoring must be raised, and when attention to fluency and meaning might carry priority over accuracy and cross checking.

Children who make slow progress in reading often reach a sticking point in problem-solving new words "on the run" (during the task of reading with attention on meaning). They may easily guess a meaningful word, and, sometimes, they even may guess a word that looks like the word on the page. But supplying a word that fits both meaning and letter-correspondences seems beyond their reach. Is the problem one of inability to respond to two conditions simultaneously? Or, have they not yet learned how to do this in reading? I suspect the latter is the case. If we watch these children during the day, I think we would observe them responding to multiple conditions simultaneously—for example, they seem to be able to look both ways for cars while calling to their friend across the street (perhaps better than adults can do!).

As they encounter new words in reading, these children tend to guess on the basis of meaning only (usually) or on letter information only. I have suggested previously (Jones, 1994) that teaching children to cross-check responses should precede, "getting your mouth ready," since

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the latter prompt asks the child to produce a response that fits both the meaning and the letter cues at the same time. As children learn how to cross-check, they are learning much more than letter-sound correspondences. They are learning how to become aware of the sounds of the word they first try (linguistic and phonemic awareness). Also, they may be learning how to search their own mental lexicon for words to match visual letter patterns. As they gain control of these processes, they gain the flexibility and fluency necessary to search quickly; soon, they are able to respond to both sources of information almost simultaneously.

Determining what part of the reading process the child finds difficult can suggest ways to fill in gaps that may enable a new level of responding.

For children having trouble trying words that fit both the meaning and the visual patterns at the same time, teachers need to observe carefully, throughout the lesson, children's ability to deal with phonological analysis. A teacher should observe whether the child is able to hear and write any sounds in words; identify and write some initial sounds without teacher assistance and intervention; analyze an oral word and predict what letter it might begin with; and, learn and retain knowledge of printed words.

Teachers also need to observe carefully what children are able to notice visually (using activities described in the section, "When It Is Hard to Remember," Clay, 1993), and what they habitually attend to visually while reading (using close observation and running records). Determining what part of the reading process the child finds difficult can suggest ways to fill in gaps that may enable a new level of responding.

Scenario: The child has difficulty remembering

A complaint commonly heard from Reading Recovery teachers concerning hard-to-teach children is that they have difficulty learning and retaining new items of knowledge, such as letters and words. The child seems to have learned a word one day, but the next day s/he cannot remember how to write it or how to read it. The teacher may report that she has used the recommendations in Clay's text (Clay, 1993), particularly sections 4, 13, 14, 15; yet, the child still does not seem to retain the information. After unsuccessful efforts over time, the teacher may conclude that this child has a learning disability.

An important caution here refers back to the previous section. Too many children have not experienced and do not understand the on-going process of fluent reading while they focus on the meaning of the story (using, initially, whatever help or scaffolding they might need from the teacher). For a number of reasons, many children find it difficult to learn specific items of knowledge (word and letters) when these become the emphasis of learning. In other words, the difficulty of learning items of knowledge may be real, but the issue may be exacerbated by the teaching emphasis to which the child is being exposed. Learning to attend and remember is not easy for young children, and the belief that memory difficulties indicate limited capacity is hard to resist.

David Wood (Wood, 1988) tells us that the rush to judgement about *ability* to learn is actually a judgement about what the child has not yet succeeded in learning how to do:

> ***Deliberate attempts to commit information to memory are not the product of a "natural ability," but involve learned activity.* In fact they involve a series of activities. The skill in undertaking each of these increases with age throughout the early years of school and beyond (Wood, 1988, p. 56).**

Wood goes on to give examples showing how young children rather easily learn and remember things that arise as a natural—and often incidental—consequence of their activities. But they have very limited strategies for learning and remembering things that other people ask them to learn. Even if they are taught and reminded to rehearse verbal information (like a letter name), they will not often use this skill unless they are continually reminded. Similarly, they will not work to create and retain a visual image of something without adult intervention. Useful intervening activities include tracing, manipulating, and comparing, and teacher prompting to form a mental image of the object or sign.

One child I taught had the usual difficulties with recall that Reading Recovery children have. He would come to a word that he had written and read several times and fail to remember what it was. However, he had an amazing ability to remember which book he had read that word in previously. Before I could stop him, he would pull another book out of his book box, flip to a page that word was on, find it, read it, then return to the first book and go on reading.

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Since this wasn't an efficient strategy, I did not encourage it; also, I did not know what to make of his ability.

Looking back, his behavior seems consistent with Wood's observation about "incidental consequence of activities." It also demonstrates how strong this child was at carrying meaning in his head as he read and in using meaning associations as an aid to recall.

I have observed children who try "remembering" items in response to teachers' requests when they really do not know what to do to recall the item. Once they have produced the letter or word that the teacher wants (often with considerable teacher input and assistance), they forget about it and seem to carry forward no more memory trace than before. Just telling a child to, "Look at it," or, "Study it," does little good. Teachers need to be more helpful, more aggressive, as well as more patient, in helping children learn how to learn. Wood continues:

> **If we want children to learn and remember things, we must often scaffold the process for them by setting tasks, arranging materials, reminding and prompting them. Eventually they will come to do such things for themselves (at least on occasion) and will discover how to rehearse and so on (Wood, 1988, p. 61).**

Teachers need to reflect about how hard it is to remember the name of a person that was just introduced, or to remember where they parked their car at the mall. These tasks require sophisticated strategies and the persistent attention to remember that comes from awareness of how important it is not to forget. Young children not only lack strategies for remembering, they do not understand the purpose and they have not accepted the importance of remembering items teachers want them to learn.

The more questions a child hears that he cannot answer, the more remote the possibility of accelerated learning becomes.

Sections in Clay's text (1993), "Learning to look at print," and, "When it is hard to remember," are intended to help children who have difficulty learning letters and words. Yet teachers must still work thoughtfully to make the activities fit each child's needs. Often a teacher attempting to use procedures from Clay's text may, inadvertently, be telling or showing the answer so that the child does not have to remember it. One example comes from use of the individually-tailored alphabet book (Clay, 1993, pp. 26-27). If practice on the letter is always done with pages of the alphabet book in view, the child may simply be depending upon the model which he always sees before him. To change this, teachers may need to arrange other and varied situations for recall. For example, they might look for opportunities to present the picture alone (or the letter name alone) and ask the child to write (produce) the letter form from memory. Clay's text (1993) as well as Wood's explanations (1988) reminds us how important it is, also, to practice this recall throughout the lesson in all reading and writing activities.

The point here is that teachers need to analyze the tasks they are setting for children. What is presented to the child? Is it the letter name ("dee"), the letter form (d), the picture associated with the letter (dog), or some combination of these? Next, analyze how the child is asked to respond. Is the child asked to trace, match, identify among choices, or reproduce from memory? Often, the learning activities involve only matching or identification among choices, when the teacher's concern is that the child cannot reproduce the form independently. Clay's text has activities for each of these levels of presentation and response. With careful analysis and a studied re-reading of these sections, teachers can find patterns and routines that should help the child learn how to attend and remember and begin to build a repertoire of knowledge.

Teachers working with children who find it hard to remember may not recognize the need for frequent practice and review of items that are only partially known or known and accessible only through one cuing system (such as writing the word). There is a tendency to move away from partially known items and introduce too many new learnings too quickly. At the same time, teachers may fail to hold the child accountable for using what s/he knows. Teachers can refer to page 40 in Clay's text (1993), "Locating one or two known (or unknown) words," to find excellent suggestions for getting the child to call up and use his developing item knowledge in the process of reading.

Scenario: Processing problems in hearing sounds in words

If a child finds some part of the reading process difficult, the teacher must work actively and efficiently to find a solution. It is not satisfactory to say, "Johnny can hear final sounds but he can never identify initial sounds in words." Some way must be found to surmount this hurdle; otherwise, the child will find himself unable to respond to more and more of the teacher's questions and prompts. The more questions a child hears that he cannot answer, the more remote the possibility of accelerated learning becomes.

A pattern observed in teachers-in-training is to continue to be too helpful when a child finds phonological processing difficult. It is forgivable once or twice to give the answer when a child cannot respond to a question or prompt. But once

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the teacher is aware of the difficulty, what is called for is a careful demonstration that makes sense to the child. Identification of initial sounds in words provides a good example. Using the Elkonin boxes, children may be asked to complete the analysis task independently: push the token, identify and become aware of the sound, recall a word or letter associated with that sound, and write the correct form.

Good things happen when a Reading Recovery teacher figures out a way to enable a lagging learner to accelerate.

But if the child is unable to do this, the task may need to be broken down so that help can be given with the particular aspect the child finds difficult: awareness, or matching to a known word, or letter-sound association, or recall of the letter form. Clay suggests various activities to help the child develop: (1) attention to the *sound* features of language and of words (Clay, 1993, "Early learning," and Step I, p. 32); (2) awareness of specific sounds or sounds in specific positions (such as using a mirror to see how the sound is formed in the mouth, p. 32); (3) letter-sound associations using letter books and alphabet books; and, (4) writing the form ("Learning to look at print," p. 23-26).

Conclusion

This discussion treats rather briefly only a few of the areas of difficulty that may underlie "hard-to-accelerate" cases. Although suggestions have been made about possible difficulties, teachers must consider each child individually and realize that their analysis is only a hypothesis until they put it into action and observe effects. Relevant topics not discussed include: strong skills that block learning, monitoring, one-to-one correspondence, a number of language issues, and, the possibility that "writing may not be receiving enough emphasis" (Clay, 1993, p. 57).

In closing, three points bear repeating:

1. All children can learn; if they appear not to be learning, the program "... is not, or has not been, appropriately adapted to the child's needs" (Clay, 1993, p. 56).
2. The responsibility for puzzling out what might be inadequate in the child's program rests squarely with the Reading Recovery teacher. Working with a colleague and/or the teacher leader is encouraged; however, the teacher must, "First check up on [herself] as a teacher" (p. 56).
3. The aim of the program is to significantly reduce the number of reading failures within a system.

Good things happen when a Reading Recovery teacher figures out a way to enable a lagging learner to accelerate. There are positive outcomes in terms of the child's learning, in terms of the teacher's learning, and in terms of program acceptance by stakeholders. The work is hard, but the pay-off has far-reaching implications.

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